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Anti-virus software failing business

> **Large businesses** are riddled with viruses and continue to suffer denial-of-service (DoS) attacks, despite diligently buying anti-virus software. This state of affairs is highlighted in the bi-annual survey from the UK's Department of Trade and Industry, published in April.

Half of all UK businesses suffered from virus infections or DoS attacks last year, up from 41% in 2002 and 16% in 2000. This is despite the presence of anti-virus software in 99% of large businesses.

"It is a clear indication that attacks are getting ahead of anti-virus software," said Gerhard Eschelbeck, chief technology officer of security firm Qualsys. "Anti-virus software only offers companies one-dimensional protection. Most worm attacks use multiple attack vectors. This trend has continued since the Nimda virus." While worms sent through email can be trapped by anti-virus software, they can come through a back door or be spread through their own built-in email servers.

As well as becoming more sophisticated, viruses are appearing more quickly after vulnerabilities are announced. "The window of exploit is shortening," said Eschelbeck. "It only took three weeks between the Blaster vulnerability being announced and seeing the worm." And the infections are also spreading quickly – the Slammer worm, for example, was widespread within minutes of being unleashed.

The biggest challenge for companies is to patch their systems to fix these vulnerabilities; there are up to 40 vulnerabilities announced each week and each organisation can be affected differently by each one.

Eschelbeck said it is imperative that companies take an active stance on security and carry out regular security audits. He added that steps taken by Microsoft to have a monthly release cycle will help companies plan their patch strategy and warned that companies need to address vulnerabilities across all operating systems, as all are affected (see masterclass p30). ■

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